

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 939

CS 508 982

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TITLE Offering a Pragmatic Approach to State Speech Association Involvement in Advocacy Efforts.
PUB DATE Apr 94
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Communication Association (Oklahoma City, OK, April 6-9, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides -- Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Advocacy; *Educational Policy; Higher Education; *Organizational Communication; Policy Formation; Program Descriptions; Secondary Education
IDENTIFIERS Educational Issues; *Texas Speech Communication Association

ABSTRACT

Organizations seeking advocacy roles must be informed, organized, and consistent in their commitment to achieve and maintain success. The experiences of the Texas Speech Communication Association's 12-year process to become a viable force in drafting and implementing educational policy in Texas might be useful to other state educational organizations seeking to influence policy in their respective states. If protecting the interests of speech communication in the curriculum in public and higher education is a focus of the state association, the organization must be involved and active. Involvement in advocacy efforts should be considered carefully before any action is taken. It is essential that state organizations seeking involvement in policy making endeavors establish a network for forming organizational positions and implementing the organization's chosen course of action. Organizations also need to observe the following guidelines: (1) keep up with changes in a state's legislative bodies, committees, and in individuals serving in various policy making processes; (2) gather and marshal facts regarding all facets of state and national legislation; (3) set goals; (4) formulate a clear position; (5) cover all fronts by conducting local surveys, and working with other state and national organizations; (6) engage in a systematic, pragmatic approach; (7) follow through by maintaining communication with policy making officials; (8) when necessary, use candid dialogue when commitments are not honored by policy makers; and (9) "don't count your chickens before they hatch." (RS)

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"Offering a Pragmatic Approach to State Speech Association Involvement in Advocacy Efforts"

Central States Speech Communication Association

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

April 6 - 9, 1994

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"Offering a Pragmatic Approach to State Speech Association
Involvement in Advocacy Efforts"
OR
Lessons Learned, Unlearned, and Relearned the Hard Way
in Seeking to Influence Educational Policy in Texas

This is not a scholarly paper. Rather its content is founded in a twelve year process undertaken by the Texas Speech Communication Association to be a viable force in drafting and implementing educational policy in Texas. Certainly there is no intent implied herein for giving advice. The intent, rather, is to share insights that might be useful to other state educational organizations seeking to influence policy in their respective states.

In preparation for writing this particular paper, I reviewed files of convention papers, articles, position papers, letters, and other bits of memorabilia accumulated in the long road of TSCA's involvement in advocacy efforts.. One paper of interest presented for SCA in Washington, D. C., November, 1983, was entitled "A Case for Educator Involvement in Political Process in Determining Curricula, Standards, and Guidelines for Public Education." The paper outlined in detail the beginning of the educational reform movement of the mid 1970's and early 1980's. Of greatest interest was the fact that many of the issues of concern during these years ring loudly in our ears today after the turmoil and rigor of reform during the last ten years. One might wonder if those same issues will plague educators the next decade (with all due respect to the passage of Goals 2000.)

A salient insight could be gained from the review of the decade of involvement by TSCA in shaping educational plicy in Texas. Issues are not resolved only to go away and never reappear. The successful efforts of TSCA were blown away in one breath last summer with the Texas Commissioner of Education's decision to revamp Texas graduation requirements and ultimately to revise Essential Elements in all disciplines. Speech communication courses were nowhere to be seen in the commissioner's plan, which contained no elective courses. In disbelief, TSCA oiled the wheels of its 'network' and alerted a somewhat complacent membership that a new crisis was at hand.

During the past few months the organization, issued position papers, wrote letters to State Board of Education members, arranged for speakers to appear at SBOE hearings, and arranged for members to speak personally to members of the Board's Student Committee. The chair of the TSCA Committee to Coordinate With the Texas Education Agency continued to work closely with appropriate officials at the TEA in order to stay informed and to seek advice regarding possible action to be taken by the organization. Without belaboring the point, TSCA has made some significant gains in influencing change in the original proposal, and is currently on "stand by" regarding the possible requirement of a unit of speech and the eventual revision of Essential Elements for speech communication courses.

So, what has TSCA learned? What possible suggestions or considerations does the Texas Association have to offer other states seeking to influence policy?

1. **Get Involved!** If protecting the interests of speech communication in the curriculum in public and higher education is a focus of the state association, the organization must be involved and active. Reports, for example at the Miami SCA convention, from the K-12 Task Force appointed by David Zaresky, from the members of the K-12 interest group, and from a special meeting of representatives of various states called by President Zaresky brought forth information regarding threats to speech communication on all levels and from all directions. Of

special note was the concern over threats to teacher certification in speech. Concern also focused on the fact that professional speech communication educators are frequently ignored in the appointment of committees to draft curricula and formulate education policy in various states. A plea went from those meetings to SCA and to state organizations to become an energetic force in advocating the importance of speech communication skills in current curricula. The SCA Task Force's January report to the national office echoed the voices of individuals from the various states for SCA to take a strong proactive stand advocating that K-12 oral communication skills be taught in speech communication classes by a teacher certified in speech.

Involvement by state associations apparently has taken on new urgency in the current climate of reform and revision of educational goals. The development of proficiencies in speaking, listening, human relations, group interaction, and decision making are high on the priority list. If organizations do not take a strong stand on the ownership of these skill areas, they will possibly erode from the speech classroom to general language arts or social studies areas. It's a matter of survival, but real opportunity is inherent within current proposals.

2. Think Before You Leap! Involvement in advocacy efforts should be considered carefully before any action is taken. First, involvement should be viewed as a long-term rather than short-term commitment. The organization must also be aware of the fact that such commitment must be made on several levels, not the least of which is the nature and amount of financial commitment the organization can or is willing to make over the long term. Second, and perhaps most important, is the consideration of the organization's goals and the degree of commitment, concern, and enthusiasm shared by members. Advocacy requires not only the leadership of the organization but also the time, energy, and effort of the individual members of the organization.

Long-term commitment is essential if the goal is to make the organization the vital force for speech communication and sound educational policy in the state. Making "TSCA" a household word in Texas legislative organizations was a goal in the early stages of involvement. The goal implied becoming acquainted with individuals on educational legislative committees, members becoming acquainted with their respective SBOE members, and cementing already positive relations with TEA.

The goal also implied becoming interested and concerned about educational policy on all levels in order to avoid being considered a "one issue" organization. In order to be effective, TSCA had to become known as an organization interested in good education on all levels and in all areas.

Assessing the long-term ongoing demands on the organization and its members is a valuable step in pursuing advocacy goals.

3. Analyze the Structure of Your Organization! It is essential that state organizations seeking involvement in policy making endeavors establish a network for forming organizational positions and implementing the organization's chosen course of action. This area has proved to be a real problem in Texas. TSCA has an effective structure for networking (See chart approved in 1984); however, adjunct groups as well as some individual members have at times sought to influence policy on their own. At times positions taken were not consistent with TSCA's position on various issues. Appearing to be strong, organized, and clear and consistent on issues and courses of action is absolutely essential.

Determining what officers of the organization and what committees are to be empowered with advocacy roles is vital. Planning specific steps of action and clear positions is also important. Once policy and action have been clarified, all members should be kept informed of progress being made through networking, newsletters, or other available means of

communication within the organization.

In Texas, for example, positions are drafted by the chair and members of the Committee to Coordinate with the Texas Education Agency. The committee is charged with keeping the organization informed on legislative policies and action in the State. The chair works closely with the president of TSCA, who in turn works with other officers as members of the Executive Committee. All official policy statements and actions taken on behalf of the organization must be approved by the Executive Committee. Once policy is formulated, it is distributed by mail to appropriate legislators, SBOE members, TEA officials, other educational organizations in some instances, and other appropriate individuals in policy making positions.

At this point the TSCA network is activated. Chairs of relevant committees are informed and charged with taking specific actions. District chairpersons are charged with contacting the SBOE member for their respective district to inform them of TSCA's position and the organization's eagerness to cooperate with the Board and its committees. The TEA Committee Chair and Governmental Affairs Chair coordinate efforts for contacting respected persons outside the speech education profession to write letters or speak on behalf of TSCA's position. As goals are accomplished or action is taken by the Legislature, SBOE, or TEA, policies are revised and a new cycle is in place. The scenerio is adapted and repeated as often as necessary until the issue is resolved.

Certainly the previous example clarifies the need for consideration for long-term commitment and ensuring a structure and organization that can function in an organized and professional manner.

4. Become Familiar With Your State's Legislative Structure! Each state is unique. From time to time changes in a state's legislative bodies, committees, and in individuals serving in various policy making processes necessitate changes in a state organization's approach to working within the state legislative framework. The appointment of and the power granted to the recently appointed Commissioner of Education in Texas has changed the approach of TSCA significantly. The open and somewhat democratic (if political) process of the past has become much more closed and autocratic. Hearings may be held, but only small changes if any changes at all are the usual result. The process within TSCA has remained the same. The process of working with the SBOE has remained essentially the same. Work with the TEA, where the power now lies with the Commissioner, is handled with great care and sensitivity.

Not only does the State organization need knowledge of the political innuendoes of the State policy making process, the organization must have knowledge and keen sensitivity to who holds power at the moment and who the friends and enemies of the organization and its policies are at the moment.

"At the moment" in Texas the confidence and friendship of coordinators at TEA and key members of the SBOE are critical to TSCA objectives.

5. Secure Professional Advice! Without the assistance of some kind of professional guidance, efforts to accomplish political goals are frequently frustrated with misinformation, unclear channels of communication, and bad timing, especially for those wading into political waters for the first time. Leaders of organizations are wise to seek the advice of reputable and respected professionals on the legislative scene in charting action.

Professional monitors or lobbyists provide valuable sources of information, insight, and advice. They can attend legislative sessions, provide information, and serve as a liason in some instances between the organization and legislative bodies and key individuals. They also provide a professional image and approach that can prove useful to the organization.

Without the services and advice of a lobbyist in its initial efforts at advocacy, much of TSCA's effectiveness would have been lost. The lessons learned from that individual have proved to be invaluable long after the organization ceased to use her services. At the present time TSCA is seeking the services of a monitor to keep the organization apprised of issues in education.

6. **Do Your Homework!** Before launching into political advocacy, state organizations would be well advised to gather and marshal facts regarding all facets of state and national legislation and action on the education front. It is impossible to draft a position on educational proposals without supporting information from a variety of sources.

Such questions as:

- . What trends are apparent on the national level?
- . What actions are being taken by various states?
- . What positions or advocacy movements are being taken by other organizations in this state?
- . What recent studies or publications contain data relevant to our discipline and our position?
- . What is currently being advocated by experts across the field of education?
- . What historical precedent could provide insights related to the present situation, or provide valuable avenues for thought and action?

During the last year TSCA has benefitted greatly from knowledge of the New York curriculum and Regents Diploma and the Commissioner's work in the state of New York. The organization used part of the materials from Goals 2000 and "What Work Requires of Schools" (SCANS Report) to document its position supporting the importance of proficiencies in oral communication in the K-12 curriculum. Materials used by the organization demonstrated that the organization was informed and had a sound pedagogical basis for its claims.

Perhaps the best suggestion for anyone seeking to participate in the political process is to be thoroughly informed and to determine reasonable, defensible, clearly thought out positions, arguments, and answers to predictable questions prior to engaging in political dialogue.

7. **Set Your Goals!** What does your organization wish to accomplish? When details of the Commissioner's recommended diploma became known in July, 1993, TSCA leaders became immediately alarmed about the fact that even though business organizations and citizens around the state had advocated strong proficiencies in oral communication in hearings held in Texas during the spring and summer, there was no mention of speech communication courses in the recommended proposal.

TSCA has worked for the past decade toward achieving and maintaining specific goals:

1. Speech communication should be a requirement for all students on the university and/or community college level.
2. Universities should encourage and develop speech communication as a major field of study.
3. One unit of speech communication should be required for high school graduation.
4. Speech electives should be available for all students.
5. Oral communication skills should be emphasized and interwoven with skills in reading and writing, in the K-6 language arts classroom.
6. All speech courses should be taught by a teacher certified in speech.

Other goals emerge from time to time as conditions change. The threat to long standing goals of the organization by the 1993 proposals prompted immediate action by TSCA.

8. Formulate a Clear Position! The Chair of the TEA committee was charged with investigating the situation and formulating a position to be taken by TSCA. TSCA documents contain several basic approaches and premises:

- . The papers basically support a strong, rigorous education system in Texas.
- . The positions clarify what the organization is for, rather than what the organization is against.
- . Various statements may challenge but do not attack various aspects of the proposal.
- . Care is taken to avoid "turf" related arguments.
- . The organization pledges continued support and cooperation with TEA and the SBOE.
- . Photocopies of documents accompanied letters and position papers to support various claims. Of note, are slight shifts in focus as the process evolved.

The fact that TSCA's position was clear, cohesive, positive (working for objectives instead of against proposed policy), and supportive enhanced the stature of the association as a political force. It should also be stressed that TSCA's position consistently focused on general educational goals and objectives, not the interests of one discipline.

One victory for the students of Texas, TSCA, and for other disciplines is the fact that the Liberal Arts/Humanities cluster was added as a third option for Texas students as a direct result of TSCA's advocacy efforts. The Commissioner's original recommendation called for a twenty-one unit core of basic courses. In addition three courses in meaningful sequence were to be taken from a math/science cluster or a vo-tech cluster. TSCA efforts resulted in a third option containing a meaningful sequence of courses of advanced language arts, speech communication, journalism, fine arts, humanities, or social studies. The new option as now approved by the commissioner and the SBOE provides real opportunity for thousands of Texas Students.

The organization feels secure in the teacher certification issue and is cooperating with the TEA to find a "logical spot" for a speech requirement and to revise Essential Elements if necessary.

9. Cover All Fronts! It is advisable to include in basic groundwork a survey of attitudes on the local level. There may be individuals in a particular department or school who are not members of the organization or who are uninformed for a variety of reasons about current issues and activities. Department or division chairpersons, superintendents, principals, and curriculum coordinators should be appraised of the organization's activity. Occasionally parents, local board members, regents, and business persons in the community can be helpful in furthering the organization's goals. Keeping important local persons informed is simply a matter of good public relations.

When possible, the State Speech Organization can profit from working with other state organizations to further common goals or positions. A unified front presented by several organizations can be extremely effective. Educational organizations in Texas representing language arts, foreign language, journalism, and fine arts enthusiastically supported TSCA's efforts for the addition of a third cluster of choices for Texas students.

Recent developments have emphasized the importance of keeping the national SCA office appraised of state activity. The complaint that SCA may appear insensitive to State needs may be rooted in the fact that state organizations have not taken the initiative to inform SCA about State activity.

10. Be Consistent! A systematic, programatic approach is recommended to ensure consistency and avoid fragmentation and duplication. It is essential that representatives of the association regardless of their status reflect unity to avoid the presentation of conflicting viewpoints or interests.

11. **Follow Through!** Participation in political processes is a veritable roller coaster ride of dramatic, if not traumatic, ups-and-downs and dangerous curves. Resting on laurels or previous accomplishments can cause disaster. This lesson has been learned, unlearned, and relearned by TSCA.

Examples of "following through" can include writing letters of appreciation to policy makers who support positions friendly to your organization. "Following through" can also include a "Sorry you could not support us this time, but we appreciate your efforts for quality education in our state," reminder that you watch important votes.

"Following through" definitely includes staying involved and offering to serve worthy educational endeavors in your state. Officers, committee chairpersons, or other key persons in your network can offer or be instructed to serve in a variety of ways. Members of the TEA Coordinating Committee are constantly on alert to serve on TEA committees and provide TEA with up-to-date information about developments in speech communication across the country. The committee chair has served for several years as the speech representative to the TEA Language Arts Field Committee. The chair has recommended TSCA members to serve on textbook committees and special TEA curriculum task forces. In addition, the chair has written numerous course descriptions, articles for TEA publications, and other reports requested by the Agency.

"Following through" means maintaining communication with policy making officials and offering to serve their endeavors on behalf of education in your state.

12. **Put Your Cards on the Table!** The time may come for candid dialogue. Occasionally an official may not honor a commitment or may change positions during the process. At this point it may be advisable to "take off the gloves" and "put the cards on the table." This goal is usually best accomplished by a member of the organization who knows the individual or has done political favors for the individual in the past. A constituent who lives in an elected official's district or precinct is a good bet for making positions clear. In the instance that one-on-one dialogue becomes necessary confrontational approaches should usually be avoided. Opting for a firm but supportive position has proved advantageous for TSCA members. Such conversations must be arranged and approved by the organization.

13. **Don't Count Your Chickens Before They Hatch!** TSCA will continue to monitor the current revisions in curriculum and graduation requirements as well as other issues affecting education in Texas. Certainly members are keeping close watch on issues related to speech that are still unresolved. Nothing is being taken for granted!

A real bonus, accrued through the past decade of involvement in advocacy roles, is a revitalized sense of purpose and self worth for the Association as well as an increase in membership.

Conclusion:

An irony residing within the reforms of the 1990's is the fact that on the one hand educators, business leaders, and sociologists are proclaiming a need for schools to teach oral communication skills. At the same time speech educators are being overlooked as the body of professionals capable of designing needed curricula and of teaching toward the desired levels of student proficiency in oral communication. A third complicating factor is that even though the importance of oral communication skills is widely recognized, speech communication courses are being cut and teacher certification in speech is being eliminated or threatened in many instances. It is time for speech communication educators to speak out to claim their domain: a respected discipline consisting of a body of identifiable inter-related concepts and skills essential for developing and maintaining productive relationships, participating and providing leadership in team and group decision making processes, demonstrating speaking and listening proficiencies in occupational and citizenship roles, and demonstrating proficiencies in activities and processes demanding problem solving and critical thinking.

Speech communication educators are seeking leadership from professional organizations. The SCA Task Force chaired by Nancy Ott Rose made a strong appeal for support and leadership from speech communication organizations on all levels.

TSCA has learned valuable lessons from its experience in attempting to influence educational policy in the state of Texas. The most important conclusion would seem to be that organizations seeking advocacy roles must be informed, organized, and consistent in their commitment in order to achieve and maintain success.